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November 10, 1962

TO: The Executive Committee of the NSC

FROM: W. W. Rostow

SUBJECT: Soviet and U.S. Strategic Doctrine: A Lesson of The Cuban Crisis.

It becomes increasingly clear in retrospect that Moscow entered the Cuban affair with a strategic doctrine, implicit or explicit, which asserted that no direct US-USSR conflict could be successfully contained. Their view appears to have been similar to our BNSP position of the 1950's; namely, that any US-USSR encounter was tantamount to general war. Khrushchev has in the past said as much about Berlin and the impossibility of limited war in Europe.

They apparently counted on our accepting the Cuban missiles or, perhaps, taking some oblique action which did not involve a direct US-USSR engagement. When we chose the latter risk, they cut their losses and did not undertake any one of the confrontations at other points where their tactical advantage was greater than in the Caribbean; e.g., a conventional attack on the Turkish bases, a Berlin blockade, a conventional attack on Iran, etc.

When the nuclear threat failed to paralyze us, they appear to have had neither the military concepts or plans to proceed on a military level.

On the other hand, we have been moving towards a doctrine of controlled conflict, even where a US-USSR confrontation of force is involved. What we have just passed through is, in fact, first -- and brilliantly improvised -- exercise under that doctrine.

We were, on this occasion, aided by the time lag in the Soviet thinking about military policy in a nuclear age; but it is unlikely that, in time -- with the benefit of the Cuban experience and an attentive reading of the US military literature -- they will not move towards a doctrine which accepts the possibility of limited, controlled US-USSR conflict.

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If this is so, it behooves us to refine our contingency planning of specific situations in line with our doctrine.

For example, the impulse to remove the Turkish MRBM bases arose in part because we had not devised a persuasive and appropriate limited counter-move to a conventional USSR air attack on those bases.

The problem posed by those bases is not unique. One can conceive of Soviet (and, later, Chinese Communist) conventional (or even nuclear) attack on specific bases and installations in many parts of the world, under circumstances when general nuclear war would not be judged an appropriate US response.

In short, the lesson to be read from this crisis is not that the Turkish bases need to be removed because we could not immediately devise an appropriate response to an attack upon them: the lesson is that we must proceed to develop detailed contingency plans, for a wide range of circumstances (including attack on the Turkish bases), which would convert the doctrine of controlled response from a concept to a working strategy.

This argument would in no way affect the case for translating our nuclear strength in the Eastern Mediterranean into a less vulnerable and more modern form than the Turkish MRBM's now represent; e.g., the experimental Mediterranean seaborne force now under discussion.

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